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Accelerationism, amphetamine philosophy, and the Death Trip

Jules Evans · Follow

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This is a story about dangerous ideas, and words' magical power to heal and to harm. It's about AI, Charles Manson, dubstep, Neo-Nazis, occultism, and a lot of amphetamine, but it's mainly about Nicholas Land.

Nick Land in the 1990s

In 1993, techno-feminist Sadie Plant set up a research unit in the philosophy department at Warwick University called the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU). It wasn't a 'real' academic centre — it didn't have a large grant or any institutional status, it was just a piece of paper on a door. But the name drew people into its vortex. The dominant influence in the CCRU became a 30-year-old mid-career researcher called Nick Land — a fan of continental critical theorists like Deleuze, Guattari and George Bataille.

Land and the CCRU mixed together cyberpunk, science-fiction, cryptocurrency, drugs and post-humanism, drained it through the mesh of continental theory, and created Accelerationism. Guardian journalist Andy Beckett has a good definition:

> *Accelerationists argue that technology, particularly computer technology, and capitalism, particularly the most aggressive, global variety, should be massively sped up and intensified — either because this is the best way forward for*

> *humanity, or because there is no alternative. Accelerationists favour automation. They favour the further merging of the digital and the human. They often favour the deregulation of business, and drastically scaled-back government. They believe that people should stop deluding themselves that economic and technological progress can be controlled. They often believe that social and political upheaval has a value in itself.*

Accelerationalism began life as the British cousin of the Californian philosophy of Extropianism, which also began in the early 1990s (as I wrote here). There's a similar anarcho-libertarianism, hyper-capitalism, worship of new technology and expectation of a sudden leap beyond the human. But this wasn't California, it was Coventry — and Accelerationism was much darker and more nihilistic than Californian transhumanism. After all, Land's first book was called 'Thirst for Annihilation'.

Land has said: 'I have no interest in human liberation, or liberation of the human species. I'm interested in liberation of the means of production'. In other words, Accelerationism had nothing to do with expanding human potential. This was not Californian self-help. This was about liberating the machine from the human. Accelerationism aimed to push capitalism further and faster, until it's just machines whirring round in a lifeless universe. Pure Fordism.

The CCRU grew out of cybernetics, and the sense that humans are agents in a world full of other agents — machines, ecosystems, DNA, perhaps demons as well. All these entities have desires. Machines have desires. Why foreground human desires and aspirations? The obvious answer is *because we're human*. But that's not enough for post-human philosophies. For Accelerationists, the aim is the liberation of What Technology Wants. Here's a quote from a good write-up by Yuxi Lin at LessWrong:

> *our world, with its cars, finances, AI, and other industrial technologies, has a clear goal of its own: a future dominated by more upgraded versions of these technologies, with humans becoming extinct or irrelevant.*

You can come across this idea in Californian transhumanism / Extropianism too. It's humans' glorious destiny to be supplanted by AI machines. But transhumanists typically imagine super-intelligent spiritual machines, far smarter than humans. It's a worship of intelligence. With Accelerationism, at least in Land's case, I get the feeling it's more a misanthropic hatred of the human condition and a desire to annihilate consciousness and replace it with the machine. It's philosophy as modish death-wish.

Pot noodles and black magic

The CCRU was an unconventional academic research centre. The Guardian's Andy Beckett interviewed philosopher Iain Hamilton Grant, a former undergrad in the CCRU, who recalls how Land's office became a CCRU hub:

> *he had good drugs — skunk [cannabis]. Although it could be grim going in there, once he started living in his office. There would be a tower of Pot Noodles and underwear drying on the radiator, which he had washed in the staff loos.*

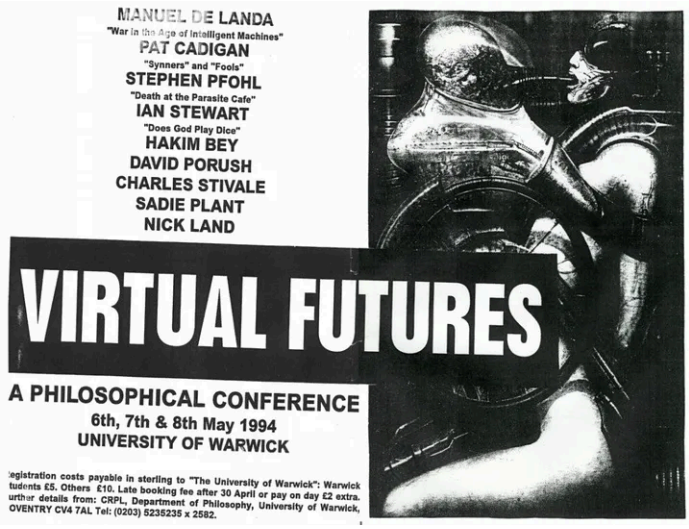
Rather like Tim Leary and Richard Alpert at Harvard, an undergrad personality cult grew up around Land. Another former student, Robin Mackay, recalls:

> *Before I met Land, I already knew of him through the gossip of new undergraduates taken aback by what they had heard on the grapevine: Did Land really claim that he had come back from the dead? Did he really think he was an android sent from the future to terminate human security? In person he belied*

> *these outrageous claims (both of which he did indeed make in writing), being thoroughly polite and amiable and, above all, willing to engage in earnest conversation with anyone…He preferred to spend his time in the bar with undergraduates, always buying the drinks, smoking continually, and conversing animatedly (and where possible, vehemently) about any topic whatsoever.*

Land insists the CCRU became so tightly intertwined it became an 'entity'…'irreducible to the agendas, or biographies, of its component sub-agencies … Utter submission to The Entity was key."

It didn't go in for publishing much, and preferred live events, like the Virtual Futures conferences held at Warwick in the mid-1990s, where DJs played Jungle while Land writhed on the floor and screamed into a microphone. Land did occasionally write papers…on Jungle music. As a sidenote, it's interesting to think of electronic dance music as a musical version of Accelerationism / Extropianism. The basic structure of EDM is the manic drum build-up and then the ecstatic drop. It's the musical equivalent of Moore's Law — exponential technological growth followed by the release into some ecstatic Singularity.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"War in the Age of Intelligent Machines"
PAT CADIGAN
"Synners" and "Fools"
STEPHEN PFOHL
"Death at the Parasite Cafe"
IAN STEWART
"Does God Play Dice"
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Well, as you can imagine the CCRU eventually got booted out of academia, and members moved to an apartment in Leamington Spa. Led by Land, the members got more and more into the occult, following the lead of Aleister Crowley, who had also lived in Leamington in the 1900s (indeed some of the CCRU rented his former house). Their writings from this period are obsessed with Theosophy, William Burroughs, HP Lovecraft, secret societies, strange rituals, Nazi eugenics — this is philosophy merged with science-fiction and occult horror. One of their ideas in this time is 'hyperstition', a play on superstition. This from a collection of CCRU texts:

> *According to the tenets of Hyperstition, there is no difference in principle between a universe, a religion, and a hoax. All involve an engineering of manifestation, or practical fiction, that is ultimately unworthy of belief. Nothing is true, because everything is under production.*

So you can destabilize and remake reality with stories, sci-fi, with conspiracies and hoaxes (a similar idea to Crowleian chaos magic, or the mindfuck hoaxes of Robert Anton Wilson, or the 'sci-phi' fiction of Wilson and Leary in the 1970s). Here's one of their fictional reports of their own activities:

> *Ccru's contributions had taken the form of nightly 'rituals' dedicated to what they openly called 'demons'… They claimed to traffick with demons who had told them many secrets drawn from a 'Lemurian' tradition of 'time-sorcery' that contained within itself everything that was and will be. Lemuria was supposedly an ancient sorcerous culture populated by nonhuman beings…Ccru also said that they had been taught to count by a sea-beast called Nomo which they had first summoned during an elaborate ritual with took place in Western Sumatra. It was clear to me*

> *from the unspoken undercurrent that human sacrifice had been involved, probably on a massive scale.*

Did they really believe in occult numerology and Lemurian time travel? Who knows? Maybe! Meanwhile, they were taking more and more amphetamine. If transhumanism's drug is MDMA or Modafinil, then Accelerationism's is definitely Speed. Before long, several of the CCRU reportedly experienced breakdowns and Land himself had a meltdown, becoming ever-more obsessed with occult numerology. Mackay writes:

> *In any normative, clinical, or social sense of the word, very simply, Land did 'go mad.' Afterwards he did not shrink from meticulously documenting this process, as if writing up a failed (?) experiment. He regarded the degeneration of his 'breakthrough' into a 'breakdown' as ultimate and humiliating proof of the incapacity of the human to escape the 'headcase,' the prison of the personal self.*

In his last text from this period, 'Meltdown', he scribbles like Kurtz in the jungle:

> *Hypersynthetic drugs click into digital voodoo.*
>
> *Retro-disease.*
>
> *Nanospasm.*
>
> *Converging upon terrestrial meltdown singularity, phase-out culture accelerates through its digitech-heated adaptive landscape, passing through compression thresholds normed to an intensive logistic curve:*

> *1500, 1756, 1884, 1948, 1980, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011 …*
>
> *Nothing human makes it out of the near-future.*

The horror! The horror! Exterminate the brutes!

Part Two: Acceleracialism

In the late 1990s, the CCRU and Accelerationism splintered into different directions. Some members like Mark Fisher created a more left-wing Accelerationism, which challenged the idea that the 'Progressive Left' should merely be what Frederic Jameson called a 'handbrake on progress' and should instead be more…progressive. That meant embracing new technologies and being more radical than capitalism. That left-wing Accelerationism influenced people like Paul Mason, the British post-Marxist,

and is still around. CCRU members were also influential in culture. One former member, Steve Goodman, went on to become dubstep producer Kode9, who released the album 'Nothing', celebrating the idea of a post-human world of pure machines.

The novelist Hari Kunzru emerged from the CCRU, as did Turner-prize-nominated Afrofuturist artists the Otolith Group. Nihilist shock-merchants Jake and Dinos Chapman were also shaped by the CCRU and Land's deathly vision. They say:

> *The combination of delirium and the crispest thinking turned the political pessimism of the time into an intensive fatalism that was productive without reserve. Land somehow stamped his mark on the death-drive, and anyone who had the courage to read his work was pulled along in the wake.*

Their work explores similar ideas of death, annihilation and Nazi eugenics. Cheerful stuff.

Meanwhile, once Nick Land had recovered his sanity, he went to Shanghai, where he still lives, and started publishing again, gradually finding new young followers drawn to his modish dark philosophy.

He now lauded Asian authoritarian capitalism (China, Singapore) as true Accelerationism, as opposed to the sclerotic welfare democracies of the West, which groaned under the bullshit of liberal egalitarian ideology. He published an essay called Dark Enlightenment in 2013, in which he celebrated the vision of American far-right 'Neo-reactionary' Curtis Yarvin / Mencius Moldbug, and bought into his rejection of multicultural liberal democracy in favour of more authoritarian options — like enlightened despotisms, charter cities, or 'gov-corps': 'Gov-corp would concentrate upon running an efficient, attractive, vital, clean, and secure country, of a kind that is able to draw customers. No voice, free exit.' He used examples like Dubai and Singapore: 'These states appear to provide a very high quality of service to their citizens, with no meaningful democracy at all. They have minimal crime and high levels of personal and economic freedom.'

This grumbling against the western democratic welfare state is popular with Silicon Valley tech-libertarians like Peter Thiel and Balaji Srinivasan, or British tech-libertarians like Dominic Cummings, who don't like how western bureaucracy stands in the way of technological innovation (Thiel supported Donald Trump's campaign and attempted to get Balaji appointed head of the FDA, in order to dissolve it). Tech-libertarians also despise Wokism and grievance culture, which they see as getting in the way of meritocracy, rationalism and technological innovation (not to mention threatening their corporate control). For the tech rich, everything that is good about San Francisco comes from them — the genius founders — while everything that is bad comes from left-wing progressivism. So why don't the founders leave the shit-strewn streets of San Francisco and launch their own

'start-up societies', perhaps run by an enlightened founder-dictator, a modern Napoleon or Frederick the Great? Why not accelerate beyond mass democracy. 'Democracy is not productive', Land now declared.

The Dark Enlightenment also accelerated beyond the idea of equality, fraternity and the 'brotherhood of man'. Land, following Yarvin, now suggested that the West is dominated by a religious structure called the 'Cathedral' — a secular liberal ideology based on the idea humans are blank slates, and all differences in outcome are caused by social forces, especially systemic racism. But we're not all the same, Land now insisted. This is the 'big lie'. He'd clearly spent a lot of time on far-right 'human biodiversity' sites, which is the modern name for scientific racism, and was now utterly convinced that (a) there are such things as 'races', (b) these races have different IQs,(c) this is the reason for different outcomes in society, and (d) the more the Cathedral denies this, the quicker it will collapse.

He says the denial of this truth leads to a panicked siege mentality among the diminishing white populations in western societies, and an acceleration into far-right white supremacist racism:

> *white identity politics considers itself besieged. Moderate or measured concern offers no equilibrium for those who cross the line, and begin to self-identify in these terms. Instead, the path of involvement demands rapid acceleration to a state of extreme alarm, or racial panic, conforming to an analysis focused upon malicious population replacement at the hands of a government which, in the oft-cited words of Bertolt Brecht, "has decided to dissolve the people, and to appoint another one."*

WTF happened to Nick Land?! You could say this is the result of extreme pessimism — he had tried to liberate himself through occultism in the 1990s,

gone mad, and emerged a few years later, like Captain Willard from the mud, convinced the real cause of modern degeneration is biological and racial, and therefore….Therefore what? What political programme suggests itself, if you passionately believe in 'human biodiversity'?

You could support a slow-down or cessation of immigration, or targeted immigration of 'good types'. Good luck with that. Land seems in this essay to see two more likely alternatives for the US — white secession, or race war. That appears to be the event horizon the west is accelerating towards, in his Dark Enlightenment essay.

But, as with National Socialism, these atavistic dreams of global race war also have a utopian science-fiction bent to them, in the idea of genetic modification and space exploration (Hitler in *Mein Kampf* said the Aryan master-race would dominate not just Earth but beyond Earth as well). Land wrote: 'Approaching the bionic horizon, secessionism takes on an altogether wilder and more monstrous bearing — towards speciation.'

He quotes a website called euvolution on the engineering of superbeings:

> *Reasoning that the majority of humankind will not voluntarily accept qualitative population-management policies….any attempt to raise the IQ of the whole human race would be tediously slow. Instead [we should pursue] elite eugenics — whose achievements would so quickly and radically outdistance the usual tempo of evolution that within ten generation the new groups will have advanced beyond our current form to the same degree that we transcend apes.*

As William Gibson put it, the rich will become a whole other species.

I had a look at the euvolution website, by the way. At first glace it looks like a sort of New Age transhumanist website, dedicated to 'conscious evolution' and so forth. But on closer inspection, it promotes a white supremacist version of transhumanism called Cosmotheism, invented by physics professor turned far-right preacher William Luther Pierce.

Pierce is famous, or notorious, for writing *The Turner Diaries* — a far-right novel in which a group of white secessionists called The Organization rebel against a Jewish-dominated United States, and finally overthrow it through nuclear war and the 'Day of the Rope', in which all non-whites are executed. This book — which inspired the people who bought a noose to the January 6 riot — makes Hitler look moderate.

There is a mystical Theosophical side to Pierce's homicidal race-hate. He created his own church, Cosmotheism, dedicated to worshipping divine evolution and helping it to evolve higher beings (ie super-Aryans), through

one-world government and eugenics. Pierce writes that there is a spiritual-biological hierarchy in nature, ascending through the animals and the human races, up to the Awakened Ones. This stock requires pruning:

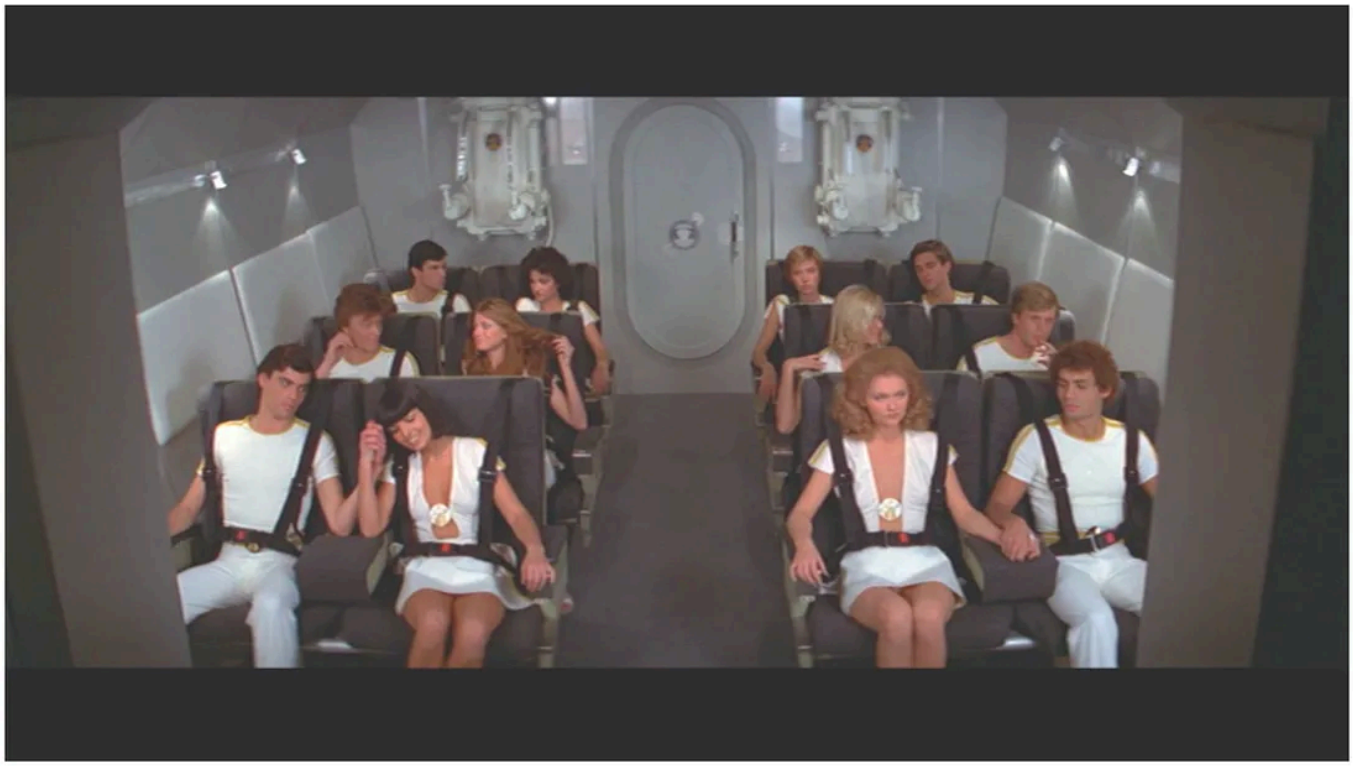
> *those living things which weaken the stock from which the Awakened Ones arise, or deny it necessary sustenance, or pull down its potential for divine consciousness, are evil, and measures must be taken against them…The Community must judge all of these qualities, throughout the life of each member… It must judge the infant, and decide whether or not its future lies in the community…*

This might seem a long way from where Land was in the 1990s, but its common root is Theosophy. German Theosophists like Rudolf Steiner and Guido von List also predicted a global race war between higher Aryans and subhuman non-whites, and also called for 'cosmic eugenics' to create superior beings.

Land projects this far-right transhumanism into space — he calls it 'hyper-racism'. He says 'space colonization will inevitably function as a highly selective genetic filter'. The tech elite will fly into space and become a different species.

This vision of space eugenics was first proposed by Timothy Leary, when he was in Folsom Prison in the early 1970s. As I explored here, Leary proposed that 5000 of the smartest, most attractive humans jet off into space and create a smarter, longer-living and more blissful species. Today, everyone from Freeman Dyson to Martin Rees to psychedelic investor Christian Angermayer believe new genetically-modified hominid species will emerge off-world. And sometimes this idea has a racist twist — white supremacist ecologist Garrett Hardin insisted any future space colony would need to be

ethnically homogenous to avoid any racial bickering. Vikings on Mars, basically.



Moonraker explored Drax's space-eugenic vision

Back on Earth, Accelerationism has taken ever darker turns. It has been adopted by far-right white supremacist terrorist groups, the so-called Terrorgram on Telegram. The prophet for this 'Acceleracialism' is Canadian white supremacist James Mason, author of *Siege*. Mason suggests that western societies are heading for collapse and race war, and argues that white supremacists should *accelerate* that process through random acts of solo shooter violence.

Which is exactly what has increasingly happened in the last decade — alienated young white men reading far-right neo-Nazi occultist Accelerationism online, then going out and shooting unarmed, defenceless

men, women and children, thinking this somehow makes them canonized into 'saints', and gets them onto the scoreboard according to their kill count.

For Mason, the key inspiration is not Nick Land but another drug-fueled Pied Piper — Charles Manson. He buys into the theory (put forward by Manson prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi in his book Helter Skelter) that the Manson family's murders were trying to provoke a race war, a scenario called 'helter skelter', which would destroy the United States and leave it free for the Family to emerge from subterranean caves and take it over. This is just one theory of what Manson was trying to do, by the way. Certainly, he was a racist neo-Nazi, who carved a Swastika into his forehead in prison, and went on anti-Semitic and anti-black tirades in his probation hearings. Mason's celebration of a psychedelic hippy was controversial in neo-Nazi circles, but he insisted Manson was an important ancestor — plus, unlike most neo-Nazis, he attracted women.

So what's the moral of this strange, dark and distressing story? I think the moral is this. Be careful who you follow and what you believe. Just because something seems edgy and cool and involves drugs, occultism and dance music, it can still be incredibly dangerous. Words have magical power to heal — and to harm and destroy. Bad ideas kill people. Not everything in the spiritual counterculture is benign. There is such a thing as dark magic, which feeds off nihilism and hate. Leave black magic well the fuck alone, and if your academic supervisor is into summoning demons, change supervisor.

As for Accelerationism, it's too variuos to generalize about. There's an accelerationist trend in New Age spirituality, psychedelia and transhumanism. You can see it in beat literature, in Jack Kerouac writing *On the Road* on amphetamine or Neal Cassady, addicted to amphetamine,

driving the Merry Pranksters' *Furthur* bus. You can hear the Accelerationism in the Doors' 'Break On Through to the Other Side', and also in the nihilism of 'The End'. Sometimes, it takes on a violent and terroristic edge — as in, say, Osho's pronouncements that the human population would be decimated by AIDS, and this would sweep away the dross of humanity so that the sannyasins could emerge from their bunkers and the 'new man' could be born. A similar violent drug-fueled apocalypticism is there in Manson's Helter Skelter, now inspiring random acts of murder.

Leary and Manson were briefly next to each other in prison cells, by the way. The smiling transhumanist and the death-dealing accelerationist talking through a prison wall. Leary recounts the conversation:

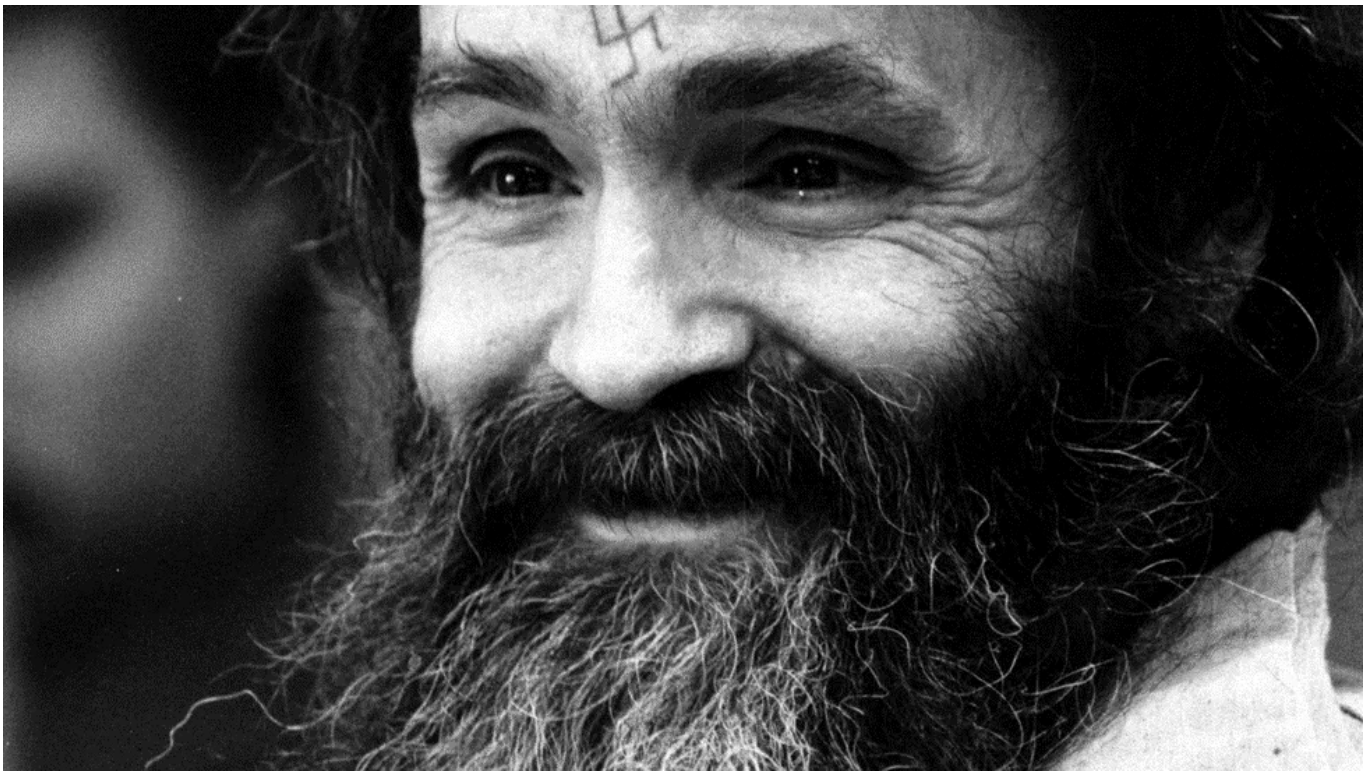
Manson: 'I've been wanting to talk to you for years…We were all your students, you know…Millions of kids cut loose from the old lies, free of hang-ups, waiting to be told what to do…And you didn't tell them what to do.'

Leary: 'I didn't want to impose my realities. The idea is everybody takes responsibility for his own nervous system, creates his own new reality… Anything else is brainwashing.'

'That was your mistake' the voice says in a ghost-hollow whisper. 'People want to be told what to do…When you take acid. And the world and your body dissolves into nothing but vibrations…that's the moment of truth, right? But what is it?'

'It's Love.'

'No, it's Death'.



While you're here, check out this interesting article on Accelerationism and TikTok, also published this weekend.

Accelerationism | Nick Land | Transhumanism | Philosophy | Culture Studies

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What are your thoughts?

Nicholas Blincoe
Jan 24, 2023

I was at Warwick at the time, Land was my PhD supervisor. I can't speak for his later racist turn (his kids are biracial, I believe). But I think you have over-egged the Leary stuff. During the rave years, everyone in the UK was reading Leary and... more

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GEORGIOS CHRONOPOULOS
Jan 22, 2023

Many thinkers are influenced by neo-liberal ideas,which in fact attack societal values.We can see it as early as 1980 s where Reagan started destroying the social fabric with result to shrink the middle class from 65 percent to a 40 percent.Also poor,homeless,mentally ill are multiplying in numbers every year.

10 Reply

John McMahon
Jan 27, 2023

Eugenics was actually practiced in the USA early in the 20th Century. The *American Breeders Association* was started in 1903. Margeret Sanger the founder of *Planned Parenthood* was deeply into eugenics, as were many members of the women's temperance... more

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